California

Surveying Farmworkers to Identify Variations of Cancer Incidence Among Hispanic Populations

Public Health Problem

Farmworkers are exposed to a variety of potentially toxic substances that are used in agriculture, and many of these farmworkers live near their workplaces or consume the products they help produce. Most studies of farmers have focused on those in the Midwest who work on highly mechanized farms; however, large numbers of Hispanic farmworkers are employed in labor-intensive operations and may experience more direct exposure to agricultural chemicals. Additional information is needed to understand the possible health consequences of such exposures among Hispanic farmworkers—including their potential risks for cancer.

Evidence That Prevention Works

Information derived from statewide, population-based cancer registries enables public health professionals to understand and address cancer in a more effective way. Specifically, this information helps them identify cancer patterns among various populations and determine whether prevention measures and screening make a difference.

Program Example

From 1987 to 1999, the California Cancer Registry (CCR) conducted a study to evaluate the incidence of cancer among members of the United Farmworkers of America (UFW), a largely Hispanic farmworkers' labor union in California. In this electronic data linkage project, information from the CCR was linked with a membership roster of the UFW to determine whether risks for specific cancers were higher or lower among UFW members than among the overall California Hispanic population. The results of the study showed that the risk for leukemia, stomach, cervical, and uterine cancers was higher among UFW members. Members of the UFW also were at a later stage of disease at diagnosis than were other California Hispanics for most major cancers except for breast cancer.

Implications

The use of high-quality cancer registry data has been pivotal in identifying variations in cancer incidence among specific populations. As a follow-up to the UFW study, additional research is planned to examine which pesticides were used and how long farmworkers were exposed to each of them. This study will help determine whether specific occupational exposures are associated with cancer. Similar occupational studies have identified chemical carcinogens and have provided direction for prevention activities to reduce or eliminate cancer-causing exposures in the workplace and elsewhere.

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